

The endless revolution of the Philippines in Gina Apostol's novels

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes how two of Gina Apostol's novels, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* and *Insurrecto*, reshape Western narrations of Philippine history from a disparate series of Spanish and U.S. wars to a long and not yet concluded Filipino revolution seeking emancipation from the colonial and neocolonial yoke. By giving an intertextual reading of the novels' Filipino and U.S. cultural references and literary traditions, including John Barth, José Rizal, and Hollywood directors who have filmed in the Philippines, the present paper argues that the interplay of these elements reproduces a linguistic variety that determines different chronological perceptions, and thus allows for different narrations of the Filipino people's revolution.

Keywords

Philippines history, historical fiction, multilingual novel, popular media, postcolonialism

“And I wanted to write about this unfinished thing – this revolution.”

Insurrecto (2018)

Introduction

Part Four of the novel *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (2009), a fictional journal of the eponymous half-blind, bookworm Filipino student who gets involved in the 1896 revolution against Spain, begins thusly: “Like a novel revolution is never finished” (Apostol 2021, 271). The journal is surrounded by fictional paratexts written by three 21st-century Filipina characters – Mimi Magsalin, Estrella Espejo, and Diwata Drake – who, in the footnotes of Part Four, question the statement's seemingly mistaken absence of punctuation, eventually interpreting it as follows: “like a novel, revolution is never finished” (271). We can glean, from this grammatical ambiguity alone, two of Gina Apostol's primary themes: self-reflexive (or meta) literature, and a conception of the history of the Philippines as a permanent revolution. *Insurrecto* (2018), on the other hand, is a novel which combines three different historical periods (Philippine-American War, 1898-1901; Ferdinand Marcos Era, 1970s; Duterte Era, 2010s) and deals with the representations of the Philippines and their history by different media. A glimpse of how hegemonic representation was conceived can be found in chapter

25, in which a 1900s American surgeon asserts that the stereoscope “is a very American invention [...] We have manufactured how to see the world” (Apostol 2018, 159). Stereo-cards were, in fact, a popular pastime in late-19th-century U.S. and were also used to document events such as the Philippine-American War. The surgeon’s statement alludes not only to the cultural, political, and economic global hegemony of the United States in the 20th century but also to the narration of the history of the Philippines (or lack thereof) by its colonizers, whether the U.S. or Spain before them.

This essay explores the self-reflexive, linguistic, and intermedial references – stereo cards, movies, and websites – at play in *Insurrecto* and *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*. The aim is to illustrate their utility in deconstructing, destabilizing, and reshaping accepted notions of the Philippines’ historical periodization. In so doing, the article interrogates the interplay between time and language in colonized spaces, where the imposition of specific tongues defines specific colonial epochs and poses difficulties to the creation of collective memory, history, and literature.

Published for the first time in the Philippines by Anvil (2009), *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* is a metafictional and multilingual novel. The text is structured into two parallel bodies: 1) the main text, which is supposed to be the English translation of Raymundo Mata’s journal from his childhood to the beginning of the 1896 Philippines Revolution; 2) the paratexts (several forewords, afterwords, and 530 footnotes) written by the translator Mimi C. Magsalin, the nationalist editor Estrella Espejo, and the Lacanian psychoanalyst scholar Diwata Drake, which provide lively comments and threads about the main text on diverse topics. Magsalin makes her come-back in *Insurrecto* (2018), where she works as an interpreter for director Chiara Brasi, who went to the Philippines to shoot a movie about the incident of Balangiga, Samar, which occurred in 1901. Magsalin helps Brasi but simultaneously starts writing her own version of the movie. The narration develops on three temporal layers: the 2010s, Magsalin’s and Brasi’s time; the 1970s, Marcos Era, when Brasi’s father filmed a Vietnam War movie in the Philippines; the 1900s, the time of the Philippine-American war, which is also the set of Magsalin’s and Brasi’s scripts.

“Phases of the revolution”

The Philippines entered the Western imaginary with the 1521 landing of Ferdinand Magellan and Antonio Pigafetta in the archipelago and the subsequent colonization of the islands by the Kingdom of Spain. Named *Las Islas Filipinas* in 1542 by the explorer Ruy López de Villalobos after the King of Spain Philip II, the eponymous derivation “Filipino” was, at first, a caste name for Spanish people born on the islands, synonymous with *Insulares*. The islands’ indigenous peoples were instead called *Indios*, “an ignorant and pejorative solecism, transported from [the

Spanish] errors in America,” notes Mimi C. Magsalin, the translator of Mata’s journal, in *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (hereafter *Raymundo Mata*) (Apostol 2021, 123). These fundamentally Eurocentric references to the Philippines and its peoples persisted throughout the late 19th- and early 20th-century U.S. imperial hegemony. It was only after the Revolution against Spain, in fact, that the native elites reclaimed the term “Filipino” as a self-designation. Moreover, the history of the archipelago, as written from the Western perspective, usually admits only two significant moments into its periodization: the Spanish-American War (1898), after which Spain ceded control of the Philippines, Guam, Cuba, and Puerto Rico to the U.S.; and the Philippine-American War (1898-1902), which formally subjugated the newborn Philippine Republic to the American colonial government until 1946.

Gina Apostol’s novels, instead, proffer a periodization of the Philippines that centers on revolution, beginning with the actual 1896 Revolution against Spain and continuing, ideally, until the future democratization of the country. U.S. interference in (or interruption of) the self-determination process, in fact, seems to have left the Filipinos in a suspended time of longing for unmitigated independence, as is made clear in “Phases of the Revolution,” a section from one of the initial paratexts in *Raymundo Mata*:

Though many trace the seeds of war to the Cavite Mutiny of 1872, the Philippine Revolution began with the Revolution of 1896 – the war against Spain. Then comes the Pact of Biak-na-Bato, between Spain and the Philippines, which leads to the revolutionists’ exile to Hong Kong. Third comes U.S. Commodore George Dewey, who shipped the revolutionists from Hong Kong to Manila during the American Phase of the Revolution, when Filipinos defeated Spain with American guns and set up the Malolos Republic. The fourth phase of the revolution, the Philippine-American war, is tragic. The final phase – (30)

It is easy to see that what official historiographies call “wars” are part of the same extended Filipino revolution, whose final phase has yet to come. This fact is reflected grammatically in the quotation’s closing em-dash, which also intimates other phases the revolution has passed through since, such as the so-called EDSA Revolution of 1986 that put an end to the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos – a subject of other Apostol’s novels, such as *Bibliolepsy* (1997) and *Gun Dealers’ Daughter* (2012). In this sense, Apostol’s novels follow a tendency of English-Filipino literature that Caroline S. Hau illustrates as follows:

Laboring under the burden of history, Filipino novels often make backdrops of the historical events that mark the upsurge of popular protest against the elite-dominated and predatory state: The Philippine revolution against Spain, the Filipino-American war, millenarian uprisings, the Huk Rebellion, the anti-Marcos movement, which culminated in the so-called ‘EDSA Revolution’ [...] (Hau 2008, 328)

Given the tendency of Western accounts to compartmentalize and therefore de-historicize and de-periodize such events, the labor of English-language Filipino literature is to revise the perceived lack of continuity in colonized peoples’ histories as they are constructed by their colonizers.

National(ist?) identity/ies

Most contemporary Filipino literature deals with the “nation’s life story” precisely because of the country’s double colonial heritage and its epistemological influence on national identity, especially at the level of language (Hau 2008, 324). It is commonly understood that Philippines’ national identity started with the Revolution against Spain, whose chief martyr was the cosmopolitan intellectual, novelist, poet, and ophthalmologist José Rizal (1861-1896) (Anderson 2006, 26). As nationalist editor Estrella Espejo explains in *Raymundo Mata*: “The Philippines may be the only country whose war of independence began with a novel [...] Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* [...]. Our notion of freedom began with fiction, which may explain why it remains an illusion” (39). *Noli Me Tangere*, first published in Berlin in 1887, is unanimously recognized as the proximate cause of the revolutionary sentiment against the Spanish colonial government, a crime that led to Rizal’s public execution by Spanish authorities on December 30, 1896. The novel, somewhat ironically, was written in Spanish – a language spoken solely by functionaries of the colonial government and the Filipino elite until its replacement by American English after 1902. Most Filipinos, thus, are generally not able to read *Noli Me Tangere* in the original language of its composition, nor most of the Spanish-written texts of the same period.

Taking this fragmentary Filipino national and linguistic identity as a starting point, Apostol’s novels combine the colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial narratives of the Philippines into a similarly uneasy patchwork by representing the multilingual and translational dimensions through which Filipinos have been forced to confront the different phases of their revolution. Moreover, it will be shown how, by flirting with diverse literary traditions, the novels act doubly to destabilize traditional Western perceptions of the archipelago’s history and to provide a more detailed picture of it.

Crafting postcolonial historical fiction

Perhaps most emblematic of these aims is *Raymundo Mata*, where the primary text – the journal of the extravagant revolutionary Raymundo Mata – is supposed to be originally written in different languages (mainly Tagalog with inserts of English, Spanish, Waray and Cebuano), but we read the English translation made by Mimi C. Magsalin. Along with nationalist editor Estrella Espejo and psychoanalyst scholar Diwata Drake, Magsalin comments on Raymundo’s journal on subjects such as translation, language, national identity, Rizal, literature, and many others. Despite the dramatic background of the Revolution, both main text and paratext continually produce a humorous effect due to the constant parody and scattered intertextual references to historical narrations, literary texts, popular culture, and everyday life. The historical setting of Raymundo’s journal and the extended use of both fictional and meta-

fictional parody are consistent with some of Linda Hutcheon's definitions of "historiographic metafiction": "To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it" (Hutcheon 1988, 125). Apostol's use of meta-fictionality may be due to her studies with John Barth at Johns Hopkins University in the late 1980s and to her attentive reading of his work: "I loved John Barth's [...] *The Sot-Weed Factor*— [...] an extremely beautifully crafted book about early American history that's so rich in detail it seems practically footnoted" (Apostol 2018, 327). Indeed, Hutcheon uses John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) as a case study in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), analyzing it as a quintessential historiographic metafiction whose intertextuality is apparent from the very title, a reference to Ebenezer Cooke's satirical poem of the same name set in colonial Maryland. Apostol's *Raymundo Mata*, to a certain extent, harks back to Barth's satirical parody of the foundational national myths and actual historical events conveyed through the intercession of semi-fictional interpreters.

However, Barth's methodology of composition differs from Apostol's in the attitude towards the historical research that lies behind the novels. In an essay about the craft of his novel, Barth states:

90 percent of what I once knew about [Maryland's] history, and have since forgotten, is in plain view on the surface of [the] novel, where it serves its fictive purposes without making the author any sort of authority [...] I'm already uncertain which of [the] historical details are real and which I dreamed up. (1979)

Unlike Barth, *Raymundo Mata* Apostol ensures a clear distinction between historical veracity and fictional license despite the playfulness of its form. While Barth is not concerned about forgetting Maryland's history because his research served "fictive purposes" and because the novel "isn't actually 'about' Maryland at all" (Barth 1979), Apostol is concerned about both fictive purposes and the amnesia of Philippines' history. Apostol's concerns reflect an attitude which is common to contemporary "post-postmodernist" novelists, meaning by this term that what "comes after postmodernism has not completely abandoned postmodernism but, rather, has kept certain aspects while moving away from others" (Frangipane 2019, 8). In this sense, many authors

do not seek to run away from postmodernism but, rather, they seek to affirm some of the baseline theoretical assumptions of postmodernism, while using them to different ends. Where postmodernists saw radical uncertainty and unknowability, post-postmodernists see an opportunity to build a different kind of truth. (Frangipane 2019, 9)

The historical facts, names, places, and dates to which *Raymundo Mata* refers, in fact, are based on historical records, academic research, and official memoirs cited at the end of the book in its only non-fictional paratext. The history of the Philippines' Revolution, in fact, has

been continually undermined and effaced by the colonial empires of both Spain and the U.S. (Balce 2022, 46-47). Thus, the inclusion of bibliographical references at the end of *Raymundo Mata* becomes a political stance, an authoritative claim on the crafting of historical fiction whose reality the average Western reader might not otherwise be able to parse.

Another feature that differentiates Apostol's novel from Hutcheon's case studies of historiographic metafiction is its multilingual dimension. As previously mentioned, *Raymundo Mata* employs several languages spoken in the Philippines during the revolution to reflect the linguistic peculiarities of its Filipino context, where

to inhabit multiple mother tongues means that speaking any one language entails translating not only across different languages but also within the same language insofar as they are spoken in different ways in different contexts. Inter- and intralingual translation defines the condition of speaking any language in the Philippines. (Rafael 2016, 5)

The use of multiple languages, indigenous (Tagalog, Waray, and Cebuano) and colonial (Spanish and English), in *Raymundo Mata* challenges what Pascale Casanova calls the "Herder effect," derived from German philosopher Johann G. Herder's theory about the equivalence between language and nation, which spread worldwide among dominant and forming nations during the 19th century in order for them to compete globally with the "literary capital" of hegemonic national literatures (Casanova 2006, 75-81). *Raymundo Mata*'s multilingualism – not always supplied with translations for foreign words and phrases – dismantles the nation-language equivalence and decentralizes the hegemony of dominant languages, both colonial (English and Spanish) and national (Tagalog), by employing recurrent puns and linguistic ambiguities among two or more languages, and by centering the novel on the translation of a multilingual journal.

The practice of footnoting

The poetics of *Raymundo Mata* are also influenced by the writings of one of its own elusive protagonists, José Rizal. In 1889, the historical Rizal published an annotated edition of *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (1609) by Spanish lieutenant Antonio de Morga, a survey of the Philippines' society, cultures, and customs during his tenure as governor. In postmodern fashion, Rizal's commentary consists of lengthy footnotes placed in counterpoint to Morga's assumptions about his subjects. According to Hartwell,

[Rizal's] witty interjection adds extra information that destabilizes the original text he annotates, infusing it with ironic and impertinent difference, a dangerous supplement. Through such a slippery addition, Rizal reveals the logic of the entire history to be violent and volatile and his use of humor solicits the readers' perplexed pleasure and empathetic agreement. (2018, 58)

Through his footnotes, Rizal reclaims a pre-Hispanic history of the Philippines and, by blurring the lines between history and fiction, theorizes a unified Filipino people who should join in the formation of a “productive country” opposed to Spain (Hartwell 2018, 61). Whether Rizal’s vision of a united Filipino people was historically founded or not, it is important here to emphasize his endeavors to establish the Filipino people in time. Rizal asserts for them a past, present, and future of self-determination that could stand up to Spanish chronocentrism: “According to Rizal, authority is linked to one’s voice, that is one’s ability to talk about ‘our Yesterday’, as well as the category of ‘us’. This knowledge of the past allows Filipinos to know themselves and to ‘study their future’” (Hartwell 2018, 58). If anything, Rizal’s annotation of Morga’s survey is a recapitulation of his first attempts at building a temporal bulwark for his theory of a unified people. These attempts began two years earlier in *Noli Me Tangere*, as Benedict Anderson’s groundbreaking *Imagined Communities* (1983) points out (2006, 26-29).

In discussing the birth of nationalisms across the world, Anderson identifies “homogenous time” (that is, the time perceived collectively by a “national” community) as a key factor in the building of nationalisms: “[t]he idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (2006, 26). Additionally, the opening of *Noli Me Tangere* is, to Anderson, a typical example of the centralizing synchronicity of “homogeneous time”: “the image (wholly new to Filipino writing) of a dinner-party being discussed by hundreds of unnamed people, who do not know each other, in quite different parts of Manila, in a particular month of a particular decade, immediately conjures up the imagined community” (2006, 27-28). Ultimately, the novel and the annotations of Morga’s survey serve as an explication and model of this new chronology around which the Filipino people can meet and anchor their political aims.

There is an obvious metaliterary valence, then, to the repeated use of Rizal’s footnoting strategies in the reconstruction of Rizal’s own life and times in *Raymundo Mata*. As an expert reader of Rizal’s writings and Anderson’s, Apostol has called Rizal’s annotation of Morga “one of the first postcolonial novels of the [Philippines]” (Apostol 2014). Compared to Rizal’s commentary, Apostol’s novel shifts the era from the 17th to the 19th century, and, with both Raymundo’s journal and the extensive footnotes, it re-establishes a Filipinos’ chronology around the events of the Revolution. As in Rizal, where between Morga’s text and Rizal’s footnotes, there is an almost 300-year gap; in Raymundo Mata, there is an almost 100-year gap between Raymundo’s journal and the paratexts by Magsalin, Espejo, and Drake, which are written in the early 2000s. Moreover, there is a discrepancy in data accuracy between text and paratexts. Raymundo is often inaccurate and unreliable about dates (for example, in Part Four, most of the entries begin with a date and a question mark) and sometimes quite

indifferent, as in “Entry #24,” where he attends one of the first gatherings of the Katipunan (the secret society, founded in 1892, which started the Revolution):

Frankly I got bored. They brought up names, events, and sequels to argument I did not know the beginnings of, even addenda to incidents that happened in 1875! Please, I wanted to scream – it’s 1892, may we please leave the medieval age and get back to the modern world? (159)

On the other hand, the footnotes by Magsalin, Espejo, and Drake offer, interspersed among their hilarious interactions, accurate historical data so that the readers of today can learn about the facts of the Revolution through several layers of playfulness, humor, parody, and satire. And, for Filipino readers specifically, the novel is also an attempt to modernize and de-propagandize Rizal and his novels, which, due to linguistic gaps, bad translations, and “systematic bowdlerization” of said translations “in the name of official nationalism,” are not really read by Filipinos (Anderson 1998, 232-234). Apostol stated that before her re-discovery of Rizal, he was “a corny figure brooding over lousy suicidal moths and providing killjoy quotes for vacuous people’s speeches” (Apostol 2014), something which is expressed in the novel by Estrella Espejo in note 340, where she comments Mata’s first reading of Rizal: “to me, the *Noli*’s meaning has vanished completely [...]. And so I envy Raymundo Mata. And anyone who read that book with original passion” (150).

Connecting revolutions

Apostol’s rehabilitation of Rizal and his importance for a “Filipino chronology” in *Raymundo Mata* continues in her novel *Insurrecto*, which moves beyond Rizal’s time and addresses the consequences of the Revolution against Spain: the subsequent American imperialist invasion of the Philippines and the war that followed. In the same way that the Spanish-American War (or the first phase of the Revolution) and the Philippine-American War (the fourth phase of the Revolution) are intrinsically related and must be read together, it is likewise instructive to treat *Raymundo Mata* and *Insurrecto* as sequential novels like the revolutionary events of their plots.

The most obvious connection between the novels is the continued presence of Mimi C. Magsalin as a central character, along with occasional appearances from Estrella Espejo. Magsalin’s very name is also symbolically consistent with both novels: Magsalin is the matronymic of Crisostomo Ibarra – the protagonist of Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* – and the verb *magsalin* means “to translate” in Tagalog (Apostol 2021, 27; 2018, 59). Set in the 2010s with flashbacks to the 1910s and 1970s, *Insurrecto* follows Magsalin as she is hired by Italian American director Chiara Brasi to act as an advisor and interpreter for her film about the 1901 retaliatory massacre of Filipino natives by U.S. troops in Balangiga, Samar province. After reading the script, heavily biased because of Brasi’s white Western gaze, Magsalin starts writing her own script, which centers on Caz, a Filipina schoolteacher. In *Insurrecto*, Apostol

seeks to situate the Philippine-American war within a Filipino gaze by referring to the Balangiga incident as a geopolitical catalyst:

The Balangiga incident of 1901 is a true story in two parts, a blip in the Philippine-American War (which is a blip in the Spanish-American War, which is a blip in latter-day outbreaks of imperial hysteria in Southeast Asian wars, which are a blip in the infinite spiral of human aggression in the livid days of this dying planet, and so on). (34)

To center the incident on the timeline of a larger Filipino Revolution is an attempt to prevent collective amnesia and put white chronocentrism in perspective. Just as the accessibility of records of the Revolution against Spain is complicated by language gaps among Filipinos, the memory of the Philippine-American War has been threatened by the WWII-era American (ally at that time) destruction of libraries and historical archives in Manila and by the relative lack of Filipino records of rebellions against Americans. The U.S. imperial archive, on the other hand, hides the records of American retaliations against Filipinos (See 2017, 2). The novel's closing note, "Philippine-American war is unremembered" (314), echoes Nerissa S. Balce – who is credited in the Acknowledgments – when she states: "the Philippine-American war remains an abject or forgotten war. In American academe and popular memory [...] not only is the war not mentioned, there is also no accounting of its absence" (Balce 2016, 27). Even in its own time, the Philippine-American War was called a "mere footnote" to the Spanish-American War (Balce 2016, 25), a phrase even more relevant in the context of Filipino literature, where footnoting plays a leading role as evidenced by both Rizal's and Apostol's works.

Neocolonial/indigenous pop

If *Raymundo Mata's* form is indebted to the influence of 19th-century literary practices and genres, such as the annotated journal with its glosses and footnotes, *Insurrecto's* "intermedial" narrations and combinations, to use Irina O. Rajewski's terminology, revisit visual forms such as stereo cards, cinema, and the internet (Rajewski 2005, 52-53). The novel is full of references to U.S. movies, and it begins with a "Cast of Characters" – a list that parodies the opening credits of a movie. Another feature of intermedial narration is represented by the stereographs, "a mounted photograph viewed through a device called a stereoscope, which gave it a three-dimensional effect" (Balce 2016, 45). A favored subject of 19th-century stereographs was the Philippine-American War and its plethora of photos of U.S. troops and dead Filipinos, which constitute a challenge to the forgetfulness of official history and imperial amnesia (45).

Balce argues that the Philippine-American war must be recovered from what the imperial archive relegates to "art, popular culture, or nonart, often without any overt indication of their

colonial or imperial provenance” (Balce 2016, 28). This postcolonial recovery, continues Balce, takes place with the exposure and subsequent deconstruction of the colonial and imperial stance, and with the recontextualization of “the multitude of objects [such as the stereographs] and *narratives that produce the idea of the Filipino*” for a decolonized history of U.S.-Philippines relations (29). Apostol adopts this methodology as her own in *Insurrecto*, addressing the Philippine-American War, Ferdinand Marcos’ martial law era, and Rodrigo Duterte’s “war on drugs” by decolonizing both indigenous and U.S. contemporary popular media (sports, music, cinema, literature, television, etc.). All the references to popular media emphasize that the colonial and neocolonial relationships between the U.S. and Philippines have resulted in a somewhat inextricable shared history and culture: “[Apostol]’s decolonized eye sees the colonial past and the fascist present under the Duterte regime as interconnected, mapping the traumas of empire on different bodies, places, objects, and time periods” (Balce 2022, 51). One example of a bittersweet trauma in *Insurrecto* is the recurring leitmotif of Magsalin’s perception of Elvis Presley as a Filipino popular icon:

It was a shock when she arrived in America, and she recognized that the culture she had thought was hers to sneer at was, all along, not really. The corny songs were claimed by others. [...] In America, she kept confronting these doubles, cultural puns – repetitions of details from her homeland that have reverse or disjoint significance in this simultaneous place, as if the parallel universes of Elvis and Neil Diamonds in both the Philippines and America were a dark matter of the cosmos that eludes theorists of the world’s design. (124-125)

Apostol herself has stated that, as a young girl, she initially thought Elvis was Filipino since English was the Philippines’ official language and Filipino singers also sang in English (Apostol 2018, 324; Siglos 2022, 24). Another example of how Apostol semiotically links U.S. colonial heritage (in this case, consumerism) to a U.S. anti-imperial icon is through the Ali Mall in Manila, where Brasi and Magsalin first meet. Named after Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion, the Ali Mall was built next to the Araneta Coliseum, where Ali won over Joe Frazier in the 1975 historical match called “The Thrilla in Manila.” On the one hand, there is the greatness of Ali at the Coliseum – “Ali was a saint for refusing to be drafted into the Vietnam War” (Apostol 2018, 298) – and right next to it, the representation of neocolonial decadence: “[d]uring the best of times Ali Mall is a decrepit, cramped cement block of shops hosting rugby glue sniffers, high school truants, and depressed carnival men in their off-hours” (9).

Magsalin’s claims to U.S. popular icons are ultimately the most evident trace of the colonial heritage resulting from the Philippine-American War and the subsequent American colonial rule. At the same time, Magsalin realizes how difficult it is to repudiate or ignore the “colonial” culture because, she meditates, “Manila is necrotized in America [...] – scar tissue so deeply hidden and traumatized no one needs to know it. One is the other and the other is the one” (125). For these reasons, Magsalin acquiesces to the deferrals of meaning along with

her experience of doubleness: “her self overdubbed, multiplied, intercut and hyperlinked [...]. These realizations of *différance* comprise her surrender to her new world of signs” (125). Even though she despises Brasi’s internalized Western gaze, Magsalin eventually manages to make Brasi aware of Filipino perspectives and the need to rework her script. Therefore, even though the novel closes ambiguously with an unmistakable distance remaining between the two women, there is space for the subversion of roles, like when Magsalin has Chiara sing “Filipino” Elvis at karaoke with her uncles.

Time and language

“We enter others’ lives through two mediums, words and time, both faulty,” says Brasi in one of her first conversations with Magsalin (51). Chiara Brasi is the daughter of Ludo Brasi, director of *The Unintended*, a 1970s Vietnam War movie shot in the Philippines, whose wife Virginie keeps a diary about the marital strains of their stay in the Philippines and her husband’s abortive attempt at a film interpretation of the Balangiga incident. The Brasis are thinly veiled versions of Francis Ford, Eleanor, and Sofia Coppola, who lived in the 1970s Philippines for 16 months during the filming of *Apocalypse Now* (1979). However, though Apostol used Eleanor’s actual diary in her research, the Brasis take on the emblematic role of artistic American interlopers – the Coppolas simply happened to be present in the Philippines at the same time Apostol grew up there in the 1970s. The Brasis’ presence in the novel does constitute a reversal of the usual gaze, placing the director squarely in front of the eyes of the people whose country serves as the backdrop to his films – a thread taken up, too, in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), which subverts the narrative of U.S. intervention in Vietnam and Hollywood representations of Vietnam and the Philippines. Nguyen’s novel dialogues in many ways with Apostol’s, starting from the interesting figure of speech used by historians of the Philippines to refer to the Philippine-American war as “the First Vietnam” (Francisco 1973 2, 3; San Juan Jr. 2007, 3-6; Apostol 2021, 6).

Apostol’s subversion is primarily linguistic, employing a language made of code-switching, allusions, quotations, and puns, both subtle and obvious: “language is witchcraft, a transformation,” says the narrator in *Insurrecto* (2018, 224). For example, the title of Ludo Brasi’s movie, *The Unintended*, plays on “the Intended,” Kurtz’s fiancée in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the book upon which *Apocalypse Now* is based – a choice that makes overreaching connections between seemingly disparate instances of colonialism. Similarly, the titular term “insurrecto” highlights the historically revisionist dismissiveness of U.S. generals and historians toward Filipinos during the Philippine-American War. Filipinos considered themselves not “merely [...] a ragtag band of Filipino dissenters, or *insurrectos*” (Balce 2016, 45) but revolutionaries participating in a later phase of the earlier revolution, a “resistance to

American military aggression” (Francisco 1973, 14). Therefore, the title tells us that everything is mediated by someone’s narration, regardless of the medium. Such mediation manifests itself in the novel’s temporal dimension as well, given its blending of three distinct and perhaps contradictory periods: the narrator’s present in the 2010s, Magsalin’s and the Brasis’ flashbacks to the 1970s, and 1901 in Balangiga (Balce 2022, 51-52). These three levels intersect with each other, and they, in turn, intersect with the stories of the two scripts without any textual demarcation, thus resulting in sudden time jumps. The chapters’ order in fact is shuffled (the first sequential chapter is numbered “24”), ambiguous (one chapter is both “16” and “26”), and repetitive (there are four chapters labeled “1”).

This puzzling order may recall Julio Cortázar’s alternative chapters with alternative plot solutions in *Hopscotch* (1963), while multiple narrative levels call to mind the works of Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, and Vladimir Nabokov – all Apostol’s manifest literary models (Apostol in Fantauzzo 2018). Apostol, however, added political, diasporic, and postcolonial issues to the legacy of their literary playfulness: “I like that kind of work a lot. But to put [...] existential themes alongside issues of current politics is something else” (Apostol in Fantauzzo 2018). Moreover, *Insurrecto*’s multiple and apparently fragmented narration has been read as an expression of *walang arte*, or Filipino non-coherence (Siglos 2022, 3). *Walang arte* consists in representing more than one thing at once (for example, one language), in being always in translation, in plagiarizing, reusing, and giving an apparently fragmented narration: “Filipino non-coherence is *not* about not knowing enough but about knowing, or having to consume, too much, so that the excess of thoughts, ideas, and languages that reveals itself in the Filipino style is a representation of one’s navigation through an overflow of information (Siglos 2022, 18). *Insurrecto*’s time and language shifts can, therefore, be read as a means of reexperiencing Western monolingualism and chronocentrism through the reclamation of Filipino multilingualism and a new understanding of U.S. colonial and neocolonial time.

Conclusion

Unlike *Raymundo Mata*, *Insurrecto* does not include bibliographic references but a website URL mentioned in the opening “Cast of Characters,” which links to a selection of multimedia references curated by the author.¹ This device is a clear demonstration of what Apostol has simultaneously enacted through her novels in response to imposed narrations of Filipino history. The representation of Filipino people in the written record during the Spanish colonial period, in fact, demands a response in the form of footnotes and other post hoc satirical commentaries, whereas the erasures of the U.S. period demand multimedia references to fill in the gaps of a “history in ellipses, too obscure to know” (Apostol 2018, 81).

Raymundo Mata and *Insurrecto*, in sum, constitute a continuity of and among three literary traditions and expand the suspended time of the Revolution, beginning with Raymundo Mata's fanaticism for Rizal – who gifted Filipinos with their own chronology – and continuing with later, armed resistance to U.S. troops – a precursor to linguistic rebellions against monocultural and monolingual U.S. education schemes (Harris 2011, 104-125). The novels' multilingualism attempts, on the one hand, to reconsider linguistic hegemony in Filipino and Filipino-American literature, while their meta-historical narratives among different time frames reshape the colonial and neocolonial perception of the Philippines' history by composing a thread of Filipino revolutions. Apostol's postcolonial claims call attention to the roles of history and fiction in preventing collective amnesia against the legacies of imperial and colonial chronocentrism. In doing so, Apostol is not ultimately professing "the truth" about the Philippines' history but injecting the fictional texts in a post-Rizal fashion, with erased historical records and reversing the perspective of the (neo)colonizers' truth, aware that "truth [i]s constructed from our understandings of situations. Truth is, more than ever, linked to the person expressing it" (Frangipane 2019, 9).

Notes

¹ On the website <https://www.praxino.org/>, there is a section called "Insurrecto as a Wikipedia novel" where the reader can find, among other YouTube videos and links to archival materials, a video of Elvis' live performance of "Suspicious minds" with Apostol's comment on how the character of Virginie Brasi (Chiara's mother) might have found Elvis' moves captivating and thrilling: "what's very powerful is that Elvis, too, is occupied: by the power of Black music, for one, which he appropriates with his sequined cape: US race and settler history lies in his thrill." The section called "Stereo cards," instead, shows a sample of actual stereo cards of the Philippine-American War taken from the author's private collection.

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